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ABSTRACT

A research project called Support Services for Flexible Delivery was commissioned by the Australian organization TAFE (technical and further education) Frontiers. Since 1995, the project has been conducted by using a research approach called the Generalizations from Case Studies (GCS) research method. The GCS method was developed, tested, and refined through the following research projects: Delivery of VET (vocational education and training) to Remote Aboriginal Communities; Informing New Apprenticeships through Indigenous Specific Pilots; Case Studies in New Learning Technologies; and Support Services for Flexible Delivery. The actual project proposal specified six detailed case studies of a training program delivered to an isolated Aboriginal community by a training organization in Australia's Northern Territory. The research was implemented through a dual structure consisting of a core group of researchers and six teams of case study researchers. During the course of the projects, a case study reporting framework was developed along with organizational analysis matrices in which six critical factors were framed against the theme of registered training organizations' preparedness. The GCS research approach was deemed capable of producing quality research products and highly relevant for the VET sector. The organizational analysis matrix and case study reporting framework are appended. (MN)

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Flexible delivery as a 'whole-organisation': what does this mean in practice?

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This paper is a report of research work in progress plus an account of the development of the research approach used in the project.

The research project in progress is entitled 'Support Services for Flexible Delivery'. It is commissioned by TAFE Frontiers and undertaken by the Deakin/Gordon· Research Institute for Professional and Vocational Education and Training (RIPVET). The research approach through which the work in this project is structured is called 'Generalisations from Case Studies'.

We have divided this paper into two main sections: in the first section we provide an account of the evolution of the 'Generalisations from Case Studies' (GCS) research method through a series of research projects undertaken in the VET sector from 1995 through to the present. This account provides the research method background to the TAFE Frontiers project.

In the second section of the paper we take you through the research work to date in the TAFE Frontiers project, principally to show how we have been able to initiate this project using the GCS approach.

Evolution of a research method

There are four research projects through which the GCS research method was developed, tested and refined. These projects are:

- Delivery of VET to Remote Aboriginal Communities funded by ANTARAC and undertaken by Batchelor College, Northern Territory University and Northern Territory Employment and Education Authority in 1995-1996;
- Informing New Apprenticeships through Indigenous Specific Pilots of the AVTS commissioned by DETYA and undertaken by RIPVET, the Deakin Institute of Koorie Education and the Northern Territory University Centre for Teaching and Learning in Diverse Contexts in 1997-1998;
- Case Studies in New Learning Technologies commissioned by Open Training Services (OTS) and undertaken by RIPVET in 1999; and
- Support Services for Flexible Delivery commissioned by TAFE Frontiers and undertaken by RIPVET in 2000-2001.

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The research approach reported here began through collaboration with colleagues in the Northern Territory, in particular Allan Arnott, Greg Wearne and Terry Clarke. This early work was the basis of a paper Allan Arnott and John Henry presented at the first AVETRA conference in Sydney entitled 'VET research through partnerships with stakeholders'.

The approach was also influenced by the input of Indigenous Australian research colleagues involved in the early projects. These researchers were Wendy Brabham, Alice Rigney and Pat Torres.

Djama and VET

In 1995, Henry and colleagues in the Northern Territory won an ANTARAC project to investigate the most appropriate forms of VET delivery to rural and remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The project proposal specified six detailed case studies of a training program implemented by a training organisation in the NT to an isolated Aboriginal community. The case study sites were spread across the NT from the Tiwi Islands to North Eastern Arnhem Land down to the Centralian communities out from Alice Springs. As a consortium the group had considerable resources at their disposal to conduct this form of research. But in addition, the research proposal objectives included as an outcome an attempt to provide generalised policy guidelines for the improvement of the delivery of training to Indigenous Australian communities.

The research was implemented through a dual structure: a core group of researchers and six teams of case study researchers. The core group worked through the key themes that they wanted addressed through the case studies, then workshopped these with the case study researchers. But the balance of direction from the core group to the case study researchers was in favour of the researchers telling the story from their case study site, as they responded to their informants without undue encumbrance from the core group's thematic dictates. The case study researchers then undertook their fieldwork and wrote up their case studies. These case studies were then workshopped by the total group to identify commonalities that could be taken up to support particular generalised arguments on the most appropriate ways to deliver training to Aboriginal communities in rural and remote communities.

The product of this research project was a two-volume report published by NTU Press entitled 'Djama and VET: exploring partnerships and practices in the delivery of VET courses in rural and remote Aboriginal communities'. The first volume contained the generalised argument with references to the case studies, and the second volume contained the six case studies in full detail. It was the task of the core group of researchers to write the generalising argument in Volume I, a task that proved difficult but not impossible given the disparate character of each case study.

Informing new apprenticeships

This project involved the same set of fundamental methodological issues as had been faced in the *'Djama and VET'* project. DETYA required an evaluation of five sites in which AVTS pilot programs had been implemented through the early to mid-1990s in a way that clearly told the story of what had happened on the ground, while at the same time providing generalisable outcomes that would inform new policy

development and implementation. Once again the research sites were geographically disparate, ranging across Australia from Adelaide in the south, to the Kimberley in the north and to Sydney and Cherbourg in the east. It was agreed to conduct the project through a case study method but with a firmer structure, in order to enhance the potential for generalisable outcomes. As before, the project involved initially a core group of researchers and case study researchers. But this structure broke down early in the life of the project, as members of the core group also became members of case study teams. Thus all researchers in the project became involved in the case study fieldwork.

The other key development in the approach taken with this project was the detailed preparation undertaken prior to the fieldwork. The core group met with a DETYA reference group on two occasions to thrash out the issues that would be addressed by all of the case studies. The outcome of this preparatory stage was a five-page document of relevant questions and topics covering:

- AVTS Pilot Project Context
  - Training culture
  - Community ownership
  - Nature of the 'work'
  - Changes in context
- Training Project
  - Training program
  - Training provider
  - Employers
  - Trainees
  - Community
- State Training Authority
- Informing New Apprenticeships.

The list of questions under each subheading culminated in a summary question. For example, the list of six questions related to 'The nature of work' subheading culminated in the following summary question:

Summary question: To what extent was the nature of the work by which the AVTS pilot was framed, determined or influenced by the Indigenous community's own cultural traditions and the community's own cultural and economic development agenda?

This document then became the framework for structuring the case study research in each of the disparate sites chosen by DETYA for the project.

As before, the outcomes of this project were the stand-alone case studies for each AVTS pilot site and, as a separate volume (Henry et al 1999), the overarching report of the project within which the generalising policy-oriented arguments were developed, with the case studies as the evidentiary base. Given that there was a clear sense of integration with respect to the issues addressed across the case studies as a

collection, the synthesis work associated with the overarching report was more straightforward than in the earlier project.

In 1998, in an internal document to the research team of the Informing New Apprenticeships Project, we wrote the following:

> The research approach that we have been developing attempts to work at both the level of fine-grained individual, case studies and at the level of identifying meta-issues that are supported from a collection of such case studies. This approach relies on a team of researchers working at both levels and interacting on the research as it unfolds through the case studies to the synthesis of issues.

In commenting on the products of this research approach, we wrote:

> The final issues report plus the accompanying case studies then represents a coherent whole in a research and publishing sense. Readers have the opportunity to read the 'whole' and respond to its recommendations based on the open and accessible nature of the research reports including the case study narratives.

Case studies in new learning technologies

In 1999 Peter Smith and John Henry had the opportunity to further develop the GCS research method. OTS asked these researchers to develop a research model for an investigation into the application of new learning technologies in the VET sector. The project was intended to set up the parameters and method for this investigatory project.

With this project, Smith and Henry were able to refine the research approach, while at the same time develop the detailed background and preparatory framework documents necessary for the implementation of the case study research focusing on selected new learning technologies sites in the VET sector. The product from this OTS project was a detailed report entitled 'Case studies in new learning technologies Stage 2: An initiating research project for generalising from case studies' (Smith and Henry 2000).

The report contains a detailed description of the approach, and included an explanation of a case study reporting framework and detailed step-by-step account of the research protocol for generalising from case studies. The description of the approach began as follows:

> Generalising from case studies is an approach to applied research that addresses what are often seen to be conflicting demands on research and development funding agencies. These are the requirement to support research projects that will produce general findings of the type that can inform policy development, and the requirement to fund projects that provide detailed localised information of the type that informs the professional development needs of practitioners in the field.
> (Smith and Henry 2000, p 6).

And later:

> The methodological problem for ... research teams is that of undertaking case study research involving different researchers researching different

> sites in such a way that the resultant case studies are compatible to the synthesis of generalisable issues and themes: issues and themes supported through clear referencing back to data within the case studies.
> (Smith and Henry 2000, p 6)

The OTS 'Case studies in new learning technologies' report then introduced the concept of a Case Study Reporting Framework as a procedure for tackling this problem.

> The problem ... is addressed by identifying, as a commencing step ... an initial list of research issues to guide the case study research process. The intention is to develop from the initial list of research issues a 'case study reporting framework'. This framework becomes the central instrument to the Generalisation from Case Studies approach to research and development as it is the case study reporting framework which will maximise the comparability of the case study research component of projects while not imposing undue limitations on the breadth or depth of individual case studies. (Smith and Henry 2000, p 6)

The case study reporting framework begins with an 'initial issues list'.

> This initial issues list can be developed from a review of recent research reports relevant to the focus of the research project. The outcome at this point in establishing the research project is a framework of key issues identified from prior research relevant to the field and the focus of the research project. This framework of key issues becomes the set of reference issues to be researched through each of the case studies. Case study researchers take the framework of issues as a set of lenses through which they then structure their case study research. In this way, the initial framework of key issues informs each case study researcher and becomes, over the course of the project, a case study reporting framework. (Smith and Henry, pp 6-7)

Additionally,

> This framework can be added to and refined as the research project gets underway and as researchers and the project management group review progress. The case study reporting framework is not a rigid document of fixed issues at the outset but it evolves as the research project itself evolves. The important methodological point is that by the time each case study in the project is commenced, the case study researchers participating in the project will be 'testing' the same set of key issues within the context of their case study sites and reporting through the genre of case study research but each addressing, where relevant to their case, the same set of research issues. (Smith and Henry 2000, p 7)

Smith and Henry then developed a Case Study Reporting Framework for the New Learning Technologies Initiating Project. A literature review was produced from contemporary research into the use of NLT involving vocational learners in industry, community and VET sectors in Australia and, where relevant, with reference to selected overseas examples. Then, based on this review, a case study reporting framework was developed for use in the conduct of case study research into the use of NLT in industry, community and VET sectors. In addition, OTS was provided with an evaluation methodology for use during and at the conclusion of the anticipated case study research project to come.

The detailed outcomes of this OTS-funded project are accessible through the Project Report now managed by TAFE Frontiers.

Support services for flexible delivery

We now come to the research project in progress. In 2000, TAFE Frontiers commissioned RIPVET to undertake a research project in which the following stages would be completed in sequence:

- Develop a model of organisational preparedness for flexible delivery;
- Produce case studies of five registered training organisations within which significant advances are being made in the development of organisational support services for flexible delivery;
- Write a thematic report based on the five case studies; and,
- Develop professional development support materials based on the research outcomes.

A model of organisational preparedness for flexible delivery

The model of organisational preparedness for flexible delivery was developed based on a review of the contemporary literature in the area of organisational structures, systems and functions required to support vocational learning through flexible delivery and on-line learning. This review identified three major themes relevant to the study:

- Vet learner attribute awareness
- Enterprise attribute awareness; and
- RTO preparedness for flexible delivery.

In addition, six critical success factors were identified from the literature as relevant to the development of RTO support for flexible delivery:

- RTO has a preferred model as flexible provider - a vision
- Flexible delivery support procedures in place - management, administration and teaching/learning systems
- Appropriate NLTs identified for design and delivery
- Quality courseware production capacity
- Professional development programs involving a differentiated staff skill development strategy
- Explicit coordination and monitoring of flexibly delivered program strategies.

Through consultations with TAFE Frontiers personnel, the third theme, 'RTO preparedness for flexible delivery', was further refined into four highly detailed sub-themes. These sub-themes were:

- Does the RTO have a framework for its overall development as a 'flexible delivery-oriented' training provider?
- Has the RTO addressed the skill needs of its staff for effective flexible delivery?
- Taking the perspective of the learner-as-client, a number of pathways for engagement with the RTO can be identified - are client-focused elements in

place within the RTO's systems to support flexible engagement at the level of initial contact and counselling, support and assessment?
- How are the RTO's internal services prepared to support its flexible delivery operation as a 'whole-organisation' approach?

Organisational analysis matrices

The next step was to develop organisational analysis matrices in which the six critical factors were framed against the RTO preparedness theme and the specific elements of its sub-themes. These matrices aligned the critical success factors with elements of an RTO's internal organisational services, client pathway and staff support. By way of example, the organisational matrix matching the critical success factors with internal organisational services is included in this paper as Appendix 1.

From this organisational analysis based on the literature review and consultations, it was then possible for the research team to draw up a case study reporting framework for the fieldwork stage of the project.

This framework extrapolates from the organisational analysis matrices to identify key issues to be examined through the five case study sites – issues relevant to the organisational support of flexible delivery. It is these identified issues which will now guide the case study researchers in their fieldwork and in the writing up of each case study.

Support services for case study reporting framework

The case study reporting framework for this project has three sections.

- Flexible delivery as an organisational mission;
- Flexible delivery and the learner-as-client; and
- Flexible delivery and staff support.

Within each section, issues associated with each relevant critical success factor are listed. For each critical success factor included in each section, there is a concluding summary question. There is also an overarching summary question for the whole section as well.

The full reporting framework is not included here in this paper, but in order to provide a flavour of the form the framework took as a result of this careful preparatory work, the section on staff support is included in this paper as Appendix 2.

Case studies

To date, the fieldwork for three of the five case studies has been completed. We are presently writing the first drafts of these case studies.

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided details of a research method we call 'Generalisations from Case Studies', tracing its development through a series of VET research projects from 1995 through to the present. We have also provided details of this approach to research in action in a research project that is still in progress.

We believe that this approach to research is highly relevant for the VET sector where the connection between research outcomes and both policy development and practitioner professional development can often be quite tenuous. Generalising from Case Studies research is capable of producing quality research products that can be simultaneously influential in the policy development sphere as well as being readily translated into professional development materials relevant to the world of VET practitioners.

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Appendix 1: Organisational analysis matrix – critical success factors X internal organisational services

Critical success factors	Internal services of RTO			
	Client services	Courseware services	Facilities and production services	Business services
1. Preferred model as a flexible provider: a vision				
2. Flexible delivery support procedures in place through	Student services Learning skills services Library services Student administration services Off-campus services			Business advisory services Resource planning services
3. Appropriate NLTs identified for design and delivery			Information technologies services Audiovisual communication services	
4. Quality courseware production capacity		Quality services		
5. Professional development programs involving a differentiated staff skill development strategy		Staff development services		Human resources Management services
6. Explicit coordination and monitoring of flexibly delivered programs strategies		Quality services		

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Appendix 2: Case study reporting framework

Flexible delivery and staff support

Critical success factor 2: Flexible delivery support structures in place: management

1. *Business advisory services – staff support: legal advice*

- What are the avenues for providing advice to staff on copyright matters?
- How accessible is legal advice for staff?
- Are the procedures enabling approval of major contracts accessible and widely understood?

2. *Resource planning services: staff support: budget allocation*

- What are the mechanisms that bring the financial requirements of the flexible delivery operations to the attention of the 'whole organisation' operational planning processes?
- Is it clear in the provision of financial resources within the organisation that these are expected to facilitate the strategic development of the organisation as a flexible provider? Is this the effect in practice?

Critical success factor 2 summary question:

What are the significant characteristics of management services of the RTO which are supportive of staff delivering flexible training programs?

Critical success factor 3: Appropriate NLTs identified for design and delivery

1. *Information technology services – staff support: technical support*

- How accessible are the IT services to the other operational staff involved in the flexible delivery of training programs?
- What forms of IT technical support are available to other staff?
- 's the IT infrastructure adequately supporting the flexible delivery operation?
- How are NLTs evaluated for their effectiveness in flexibly delivered programs?
- How are new developments in NLTs introduced to the RTO and selected for application in flexibly delivered training? Are designated staff involved?

2. *Audiovisual communication services – staff support: technical support*

- What is the relationship between the audiovisual communication services and the other operational staff involved in the flexible delivery of training programs?

- How are audiovisual communication design features made available to other staff and integrated into flexibly delivered learning materials?

Critical success factor 3 summary question:

How supportive is the IT and AV infrastructure to staff needing technical assistance for design and delivery of flexible training programs?

Critical success factor 5: Professional development programs involving a differentiated staff skill development strategy

1. Human resources management services – staff support: professional development

- Are there processes in place that identify management-level skill needs relevant to the development of a flexible training organisation? What are these?
- What provision is there for the skill development of senior executives and education and training managers? Is this provision relevant to the development of a flexible training provider?
- Are the management-level training and development programs and strategies evaluated according to flexible provision outcomes?

2. Staff development services – staff support: professional development

- Are there processes in place that identify operational-level skill needs relevant to the development of a flexible training organisation? What are these?
- What provision is there for the skill development of teachers, technical officers, library staff, clerical and administrative staff, IT staff, graphic artists and instructional designers, marketing staff, counsellors, student association staff, and other support staff? Is this provision relevant to the development of a flexible training provider?
- Are the operational-level training and development programs and strategies evaluated according to flexible provision outcomes?

Critical success factor 5 summary question:

- How appropriate are the professional development processes and programs of the RTO in providing staff across the organisation with new skills relevant to the RTO's development as a flexible training organisation?

Staff summary question:

What are the key staff-related organisational support services for flexible delivery in the RTO and do these form an integrated support services system?

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